

Growing Anticipation

John 1:35-51

How would you set out to write a biography? You've got to start well, don't you? With novels, they say the opening sentence or the opening paragraph is absolutely crucial. If you don't get the reader's attention with that, in all likelihood they'll just close the book and move on – perhaps to another novel; perhaps to the TV. I suspect with a biography you've probably got a bit more leeway. People know you're dealing with history – it's not as if you can simply make up the first bit just for the sake of getting people's attention. And if the biography's about someone famous, people may be willing to overlook a boring childhood for the sake of what comes later. Yet, there are still limits.

- So would you start off with something big and exciting – get people in – and then go back to more mundane bits.
- Or would you risk some mundane bits straight off?

John's telling us the history of Jesus. Strictly speaking, it's not a biography – at least, not like the biographies we have these days. There's nothing at all about the first 30 years, a smattering of incidents from the next 3 years, and then a whole lot about the last week – and, of course, there's that opening bit that goes back into eternity.

Over the last two weeks, we've looked at the first two sections of John's account.

- We looked at that bit that went back into eternity.
- We looked at the bit about John the Baptist – the one God sent to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

In the part we're looking at this morning, John tells us

about four encounters with Jesus:

- there's one with two of John's disciples;
- there's one with Simon Peter;
- a very brief one with Philip;
- and one with Nathanael.

And as he tells us about these four encounters, John brings out some of the exciting bits about Jesus. The problem is that we today don't recognise them as being exciting. We're not Jews. We're not living in the first century. We have to work at understanding how exciting some of this stuff was – and is.

For in first century Palestine, there was an air of hopeful expectation. To the Jews, it seemed such a long time since God had done anything for them. Further, these Roman legions had conquered them. The Romans still occupied their land. They saw that with their own eyes day after day, week after week, and year after year. It annoyed them. They wanted independence.

And they remembered God made a number of promises to them in the Old Testament – promises about sending a special messenger; promises about dealing with their enemies; promises about dealing with their sinfulness. They hoped God may be about to do something about those promises. They especially hoped He'd do something to get rid of the pesky Romans.

We saw something of that expectation last week. John the Baptist appeared, and people asked whether he's this special someone from God. Is he the Messiah? Is he Elijah? Is he the Prophet? The Jewish people were hopeful. It was the air they breathed.

John the Baptist said he wasn't the special someone God promised. But he also said he's the one preparing the way for God's special messenger. And so expectations grew. It's anticipated God's about to do something for them. And then John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the One he's getting things ready for.

The Titles

In today's passage we see a number of titles applied to Jesus and a number of things said about Him. Most of the titles come from the Old Testament. They're tied up with God's promises – with God's plans for rescuing a people for Himself. So they're very important – and very exciting if Jesus does indeed turn out to be this expected one. But, at this point in Jesus' ministry, I suspect they're titles suggested in hopeful anticipation. They are true titles – and John demonstrates that by the time he gets to the end of his story. But at this point, I think John introduces these titles to raise our expectations – to tell us the direction his story's heading.

In verse 36, John the Baptist calls Jesus the **Lamb of God**. We looked at that last week – so I won't go over that again this morning. If you weren't here last week, you can download the MP3. The Lamb is the one who takes away sin.

In verse 38, Andrew and the other unnamed disciple of John the Baptist call Jesus **Rabbi**. Nathanael also uses the same title in verse 49. Originally this was a Hebrew term that John transliterated into Greek – that is, he didn't translate the word, he just used the Hebrew word but wrote it with Greek letters. It's like the word *satay*. It didn't start as an English word. It was an Indonesian

word – and maybe even a Javanese word before that. We just brought it across into English and gave it an English spelling.

In Hebrew, the word *rabbi* meant *my master* or *my teacher*. It could be an official title. It could be merely a mark of respect. John states it's closer to the idea of teacher here and it indicates respect. These two disciples deferred to Jesus. They acknowledged Him as a teacher of divine subject matter. It may also indicate they were willing to put themselves under Jesus as His students – for Him to teach them.

In verse 41, Andrew tells his brother Simon he's found the **Messiah**. Last week, we saw that, when John the Baptist's asked whether he's the Messiah, he denies it. He rightly refuses to claim the title for himself. But now Andrew applies this title to Jesus. The Messiah's the anointed one. It's also a Hebrew word that's been transliterated into English. So too has the Greek translation of Messiah – namely, Christ.

First-century Jews were waiting for the Messiah – God's special anointed One. They very much hoped He'd come quickly. They couldn't agree on what the Messiah would be like or exactly what he'd do.

- Some expected a priestly Messiah who'd lead the people back to true worship of God and who'd cleanse the nation.
- Some expected a military Messiah who'd lead the armies of Israel against the hated Roman soldiers and thus free their land.
- Some expected a kingly Messiah who'd establish the Davidic throne in Jerusalem and rule the nations

– including the Romans.

And so the list went on. In the Old Testament, at different times, some prophets, some priests and some kings were anointed to their positions. And so there were lots of different expectations about this promised Messiah – this promised anointed one. But they all hoped he'd come soon – and that he'd deal with the Romans.

In verse 45, Philip tells Nathanael he's found **the one Moses wrote about** in the Law and about whom **the prophets also wrote**. Last week, we saw they asked John the Baptist if he was the Prophet. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses indicated God would raise up a prophet after him who'd speak God's words to the people. Indeed, God gave Israel a number of prophets after Moses. However, they still expected *the* Prophet would come – a prophet to surpass all the previous prophets in terms of being God's special messenger to His people. And as other prophets came, they spoke more promises of God. And so the expectation for this Prophet grew. John the Baptist stated he wasn't that prophet. Now Philip claims Jesus is.

In verse 49, Nathanael calls Jesus **the Son of God** and **the King of Israel**. The title King of Israel refers to an expectation that came from a promise God made to King David through the prophet Nathan. 2 Samuel 7:11

"The Lord declares to you that the Lord Himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever..."

And down to verse 16:

Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before Me; your throne will be established forever."

The people still expected a Davidic king – a descendant of King David – to come and claim his father's throne. Nathanael suggests Jesus is that King.

He also calls Jesus the Son of God. What did he mean by that? Remember, at this point in time the doctrine of the trinity was unknown. Nathanael was brought up as a true Israelite. He heard over and over again: The Lord your God is One. The Israelites weren't like the other nations around them with their many gods. They claimed there's only one God. So it's unlikely Nathanael means "you're the second person of the trinity". Jewish thinking didn't have room for such a figure.

Two possibilities. One relates to the structure of Hebrew. It didn't have a large number of adjectives. It made up for this by the way it used nouns. For example, to call someone *a wicked man*, you'd say they were *a son of wickedness*; to say someone was *in trouble* or *oppressed*, you'd speak of them being *sons of affliction*. So it may be Nathanael's merely saying Jesus is a godly person or a god-like person.

However, in this context, I think another explanation's more likely. Within ancient Israel, they sometimes referred to the king as a *son of God* – because of his special position to rule over the people as God's anointed one. Because of the passage we just read in 2 Samuel 7, and other Old Testament references, the term came to designate the Messiah. Thus, at this point, I think it has the same sort of meaning as *King of Israel*. Later, it came to be much more – as people realised that Jesus is indeed

God.

If you're fairly new to the Bible, you probably struggle with all these titles. I've just raced through six different titles in less than ten minutes. People write whole books about most of them – I've only skimmed the surface. If you didn't take in all the details, don't worry too much – as long as you get the overall drift.

- These were important titles for first-century Jews.
- This chapter uses them all to label Jesus.

They're still important titles – even if they sound foreign to us. Why? Because they're tied up with God's Old Testament promises of what He'd do to rescue humans like you and me. In other words, the person who really fits these titles is the most important person in history. He's central to God's plans. And these men in this chapter think Jesus is that person.

The Evidence

But why? Why did they say these things about Jesus? What evidence did they have? Well, at this point in time, they had very little evidence at all.

Jesus is just beginning His public ministry. He hadn't done much teaching yet. He hadn't done His first miraculous sign yet. That's in the next chapter. So that stuff's all still future at this point.

Within this passage there are two instances of unusual knowledge. When Andrew brings his brother Simon to Jesus,

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

That says something about Peter's character – especially about his future character and what Jesus intends to make of him and his foundational role in the church. But it hasn't happened yet. It's a change Jesus claims He will bring about in Peter in the future.

Then there's the exchange between Jesus and Nathanael. Verse 47:

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, He said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

While that's impressive, and does demonstrate Jesus' supernatural knowledge, it's difficult to think this one interchange would call forth the conclusions being stated in this passage.

Their main evidence is the witness of John the Baptist. The whole chain of these five men following Jesus stems from John's witness to Jesus. John's sent to prepare the way for Jesus. John's preached about another One coming much greater than himself. He constantly pointed towards the One who'd follow after himself. John now identifies Jesus as this Coming One. Two of his disciples believe John and follow Jesus, and then they find others who follow their lead.

So again, I suggest that, at this point in time, the titles being applied to Jesus are more in hope and expectation. They are true claims. The rest of John's gospel will demonstrate the truth of these claims – and more. John knows the end of the story when he writes his gospel.

Without that end he wouldn't have written.

But these five men, at the time of chapter 1, don't know that end. They express their hopeful beliefs. They don't know whether they'll be justified or disappointed. Other "Messiahs" had arisen in Israel before the coming of Jesus. They were disappointments. None of them delivered Israel. None of them was shown to be God's special messenger. Would Jesus be any different? Would Jesus really be the One?

John the gospel-writer knows – for he's seen the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. And he'll tell us more of that ministry in order to demonstrate these titles are indeed true titles for Jesus – that Jesus is the One who fully fulfils the Old Testament promises. By the end of the story, we have a better idea what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, the King of Israel, the Son of God. And, as it turns out, what Jesus is as the Messiah and King of Israel isn't quite what most Jewish people expected. Their understanding of the Old Testament promises had to be corrected and broadened and transformed till it matched the magnificence of who Jesus really is and what He really came to do.

The Promise

This chapter finishes with a promise Jesus makes to Nathanael (in verse 50) and the complete group (the *you* is plural in verse 51). Verse 50:

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Jesus indicates to Nathanael that he'll see greater things than this demonstration of supernatural knowledge. Those *greater things* include the miraculous signs John reports – the first is recorded in the very next section and we'll look at that next Sunday. In other words, Jesus indicates that more evidence will be given that He is indeed the Messiah and the King of Israel and these other things – the One to whom John the Baptist pointed. The evidence will climax in His death and resurrection – where He's enthroned as King in God's kingdom.

There's this unusual promise to all five men in verse 51. What's it mean? Again, for modern people, it's not clear straight away. We need to understand it alludes to an Old Testament event about Jacob. We read it earlier.

When Jesus first saw Nathanael coming to Him, He said:

Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false. At that point too, there's an allusion to the name of Jacob – the father of the Jewish nation. What was Jacob like? Originally, he was a deceptive character. He deceived his father Isaac so he could receive the special blessing belonging to his brother Esau. In doing so, he lived up to his name Jacob. But after God dealt with him for several years, his character changed and God gave him a new name – Israel. He was no longer the deceiver.

Now Jesus again refers to an incident from the life of Jacob. After Jacob tricked Esau and was leaving the land of Canaan to look for a wife (and to escape his brother's murderous intentions), he has this dream of angels ascending and descending on him. God also appears in this dream and reaffirms the promise He made to

Abraham and Isaac – the promise about the land, the many descendants, and the blessing of all other nations through him. Thus, it was a place where God revealed Himself to Jacob and reaffirmed previous promises. It was a place where there was traffic between heaven and earth.

Jesus makes a promise in terms of that story – but instead of the angels ascending and descending on Jacob, they ascend and descend on Jesus Himself. What sort of promise is this? Does Jesus mean this literally in the sense that these five men will literally see angels?

John only mentions angels three other times in his gospel – 5:4; 12:29 and 20:12. In the first two references, angels aren't actually seen by anyone. In 20:12, Mary alone sees two angels inside the empty tomb where Jesus' body had been. So there's no reference in John's gospel that this promise is literally fulfilled. Now, it's still possible Jesus meant this in a literal sense and it's fulfilled in a literal sense, but John didn't tell us about it. However, I think that unlikely. I think if that were the case, John would have told us about it.

Rather, I think what Jesus says here is that these five followers will receive confirmation of His identity. They've just acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, the One spoken of by Moses, the One spoken of by the prophets, the King of Israel, the Son of God. More than that, John told us that Jesus is the Word become flesh; the eternal God become man.

- In Jesus, the heavens are open because He's the full revelation of God. He will teach them truly the things of God.

- In Jesus, that revelation of God and heaven is made available to all humanity.
- In Jesus, the promises made in Old Testament times are both reaffirmed and brought to fulfilment.

What the disciples are promised is heaven-sent confirmation that the One they've acknowledged as the Messiah is indeed appointed by God.¹ Not only is Jesus the true link between God and humanity – they'll be given sufficient evidence of it.

Discovering Jesus

Now, this morning I haven't worked my way through the passage the way I normally do. I haven't looked at each of these four encounters in turn. Instead, I've looked at the whole passage in terms of the titles. But think about the four encounters for a moment. What's the overall impression you get? These five guys all end up checking out Jesus. They get there in different ways.

- The first two come because John the Baptist tells them they ought to check out Jesus – and they've come to respect John's opinion.
- Peter comes because his brother drags him along.
- Philip's there because Jesus found him and asked him to follow along.
- Nathanael's there because Philip's gone and got his mate and brought him along as well – even though he didn't think anything good could come from Nazareth.

So, they all end up following Jesus. They don't know where it'll lead them. They're not totally sure whether Jesus will turn out to be the one they very much hope He is. But they've got a few solid hopeful indicators – and

¹ D.A.Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: IVP; 1991) 163-164.

they're willing to see if He is the real deal.

Maybe that's where you're up to this morning. You've heard about Jesus somewhere along the line. These days, all sorts of things are said about Him.

- Some of them are true; some of them are false.
- Some of them are close to the truth; some of them are a long way from the truth.
- Some of them are only part of the truth – they're not the full story – and so they can be misleading.

It's good to go back to the source documents to check it out. Is what you've heard about Jesus accurate? Have you got a true picture that corresponds to the real Jesus?

One of the things you discover as you get further into John's gospel is that

- even though these guys have some impressive titles for Jesus; and
- even though these titles are accurate and truly apply to Jesus,

they only have a partial understanding of their true meaning. Jesus has to correct their understanding. Jesus truly is God's Messiah – but the way He becomes King is not by conquering the Romans, but by dying on a cross. These guys certainly didn't see that one coming – and maybe it sounds a bit weird to you as well. After all, being executed as a criminal doesn't look a very likely method for attracting lots of followers. Yet, that's at the very heart of God's plan. It's crucial to understand it.

So in this passage, John's raised our expectations. He's got all these titles attached to Jesus – important titles; exciting titles. The question is: will the rest of his account substantiate the expectations? Will He really be

able to show Jesus is God's special messenger? Clearly, I think he did – otherwise I wouldn't be here talking about it this morning. Most others here agree with me. That's why they're here as well. In the long run, that doesn't matter. For the question for you is: Do you think John's evidence supports his conclusion? Are you willing to honestly check it out for yourself?

If you are, I'd encourage you to take up one of three options – or you can take up all three if you like.

- Option #1: keep coming on Sunday mornings. We'll keep working our way through the opening chapters of John's account. Check out the evidence he puts forward.
- Option #2: come to our *Christianity Explored* class. It runs on Monday nights. It works through another of these biographies of Jesus – the one written by Luke.
- Option #3: come and talk with me about it. We can work through some of the evidence together. Or, if you're the sort of person who likes to read, I can lend you some books to read to help you sift through the evidence.